

in England, the *nouveaux riches* of the towns invested money in land by purchase and loan, and drove up rents and fines by their competition. But, while in England the customary tenant was shaking off the onerous obligations of villeinage, and appealing, not without success, to the royal courts to protect his title, his brother in south Germany, where serfdom was to last till the middle of the nineteenth century, found *corvées* redoubled, money-payments increased, and common rights curtailed, for the benefit of an impoverished *noblesse*, which saw in the exploitation of the peasant the only means of maintaining its social position in face of the rapidly growing wealth of the *bourgeoisie*, and which seized on the now fashionable Roman law as an instrument to give legal sanction to its harshest exactions."

On a society thus distracted by the pains of growth came the commercial revolution produced by the Discoveries. Their effect was to open a seemingly limitless field to economic enterprise, and to sharpen the edge of every social problem. Unable henceforward to tap through Venice the wealth of the East, the leading commercial houses of south Germany either withdrew from the trade across the Alps, to specialize, like the Fuggers, in banking and finance, or organized themselves into companies,

which handled
at Lisbon and Antwerp a trade too distant
and too
expensive to be undertaken by individual
merchants
using only their own resources. The
modern world
has seen in America the swift rise of
combinations
controlling output and prices by the power
of massed
capital. A somewhat similar movement
took place
on the narrower stage of European
commerce in the
generation before the Reformation. Its
centre was
Germany, and it was defended and attacked
by argu-
ments almost identical with those which are
familiar
to-day. The exactions of rings and
monopolies, which
bought in bulk, drove weaker competitors
out of the